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ABSTRACT

Research on second language learning has shown that several myths about how children learn languages exist. Among these mistaken ideas are that: (1) children learn second languages quickly and easily; (2) the younger the child, the more skilled he will become in acquiring a second language; (3) the more time students spend in a second language context, the more quickly they learn the language; (4) children have acquired a second language once they can speak it; and (5) all children learn a second language in the same way. Teachers need to be aware of these misconceptions and realize that quick and easy solutions are not appropriate for complex problems. Intuitive assumptions are often mistaken, and children can be harmed if teachers have unrealistic expectations of the second language learning process and its relationship to the acquisition of other academic skills and knowledge. Second language learning by school-age children takes longer, is harder, and involves more effort than many teachers understand. Educators should focus on the opportunity for language learning and cultural understanding that cultural diversity provides. Diverse children enrich our schools and our understanding of education in general. (MSE)

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ERIC Digest

Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Digest

December 1992

Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning

EDO-FL-92-10

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, University of California, Santa Cruz: *Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning: What Every Teacher Needs to Unlearn*, by Barry McLaughlin. Copies of the full report are available for $4.00 from Center for Applied Linguistics, NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.

As the school-aged population changes, teachers all over the country are challenged with instructing more children with limited English skills. Thus, all teachers need to know something about how children learn a second language (L2). Intuitive assumptions are often mistaken, and children can be harmed if teachers have unrealistic expectations of the process of L2 learning and its relationship to the acquisition of other academic skills and knowledge.

As any adult who has tried to learn another language can verify, second language learning can be a frustrating experience. This is no less the case for children, although there is a widespread belief that children are facile second language learners. This digest discusses commonly held myths and misconceptions about children and second language learning and the implications for classroom teachers.

Myth 1: Children learn second languages quickly and easily.

Typically, people who assert the superiority of child learners claim that children's brains are more flexible (e.g., Lenneberg, 1967). Current research challenges this biological imperative, arguing that different rates of L2 acquisition may reflect psychological and social factors that favor child learners (Newport, 1990). Research comparing children to adults has consistently demonstrated that adolescents and adults perform better than young children under controlled conditions (e.g., Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978). One exception is pronunciation, although even here some studies show better results for older learners.

Nonetheless, people continue to believe that children learn languages faster than adults. Is this superiority illusory? Let us consider the criteria of language proficiency for a child and an adult. A child does not have to learn as much as an adult to achieve communicative competence. A child's constructions are shorter and simpler, and vocabulary is smaller. Hence, although it appears that the child learns more quickly than the adult, research results typically indicate that adult and adolescent learners perform better.

Teachers should not expect miraculous results from children learning English as a second language (ESL) in the classroom. At the very least, they should anticipate that learning a second language is as difficult for a child as it is for an adult. It may be even more difficult, since young children do not have access to the memory techniques and other strategies that more experienced learners use in acquiring vocabulary and in learning grammatical rules.

Nor should it be assumed that children have fewer inhibitions than adults when they make mistakes in an L2. Children are more likely to be shy and embarrassed around peers than are adults. Children from some cultural backgrounds are extremely anxious when singled out to perform in a language they are in the process of learning. Teachers should not assume that, because children supposedly learn second languages quickly, such discomfort will readily pass.

Myth 2: The younger the child, the more skilled in acquiring an L2.

Some researchers argue that the earlier children begin to learn a second language, the better (e.g., Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). However, research does not support this conclusion in school settings. For example, a study of British children learning French in a school context concluded that, after 5 years of exposure, older children were better L2 learners (Stern, Burstall, & Harley, 1975). Similar results have been found in other European studies (e.g., Florander & Jansen, 1968).

These findings may reflect the mode of language instruction used in Europe, where emphasis has traditionally been placed on formal grammatical analysis. Older children are more skilled in dealing with this approach and hence might do better. However, this argument does not explain findings from studies of French immersion programs in Canada, where little emphasis is placed on the formal aspects of grammar. On tests of French language proficiency, Canadian English-speaking children in late immersion programs (where the L2 is introduced in Grade 7 or 8) have performed as well or better than children who began immersion in kindergarten or Grade 1 (Genesee, 1987).

Pronunciation is one area where the younger-is-better assumption may have validity. Research (e.g., Oyama, 1976) has found that the earlier a learner begins a second language, the more native-like the accent he or she develops.

The research cited above does not suggest, however, that early exposure to an L2 is detrimental. An early start for *foreign* language learners, for example, makes a long sequence of instruction leading to potential communicative proficiency possible and enables children to view second language learning and related cultural insights as normal and integral. Nonetheless, ESL instruction in the United States is different from foreign language instruction. Language minority children in U.S. schools need to master English as quickly as possible while learning subject-matter content. This suggests that early exposure to English is called for. However, because L2 acquisition takes time, children continue to need the support of their first language, where this is possible, to avoid falling behind in content area learning.

Teachers should have realistic expectations of their ESL learners. Research suggests that older students will show quicker gains, though younger children may have an advantage in pronunciation. Certainly, beginning language instruction in Grade 1 gives children more exposure to the language than beginning in Grade 6, but exposure in itself does not predict language acquisition.

Myth 3: The more time students spend in a second language context, the quicker they learn the language.

Many educators believe children from non-English-speaking backgrounds will learn English best through structured immersion, where they have ESL classes and content-based instruction in English. These programs provide more time on task in English than bilingual classes.

Research, however, indicates that this increased exposure to English does not necessarily speed the acquisition of English. Over the length of the program, children in bilingual classes, with exposure to the home language and to English, acquire English language skills equivalent to those acquired by children who have been in English-only programs (Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). This would not be expected if time on task were the most important factor in language learning.

Researchers also caution against withdrawing home language support too soon and suggest that although oral communication skills in a second language may be acquired within 2 or 3 years, it may take 4 to 6 years to acquire the level of proficiency needed for understanding the language in its academic uses (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981).

Teachers should be aware that giving language minority children support in the home language is beneficial. The use of the home language in bilingual classrooms enables children to maintain grade-level school work, reinforces the bond between the home and the school, and allows them to participate more effectively in school activities. Furthermore, if the children acquire literacy skills in the first language, as adults they may be functionally bilingual, with an advantage in technical or professional careers.

Myth 4: Children have acquired an L2 once they can speak it.

Some teachers assume that children who can converse comfortably in English are in full control of the language. Yet for school-aged children, proficiency in face-to-face communication does not imply proficiency in the more complex academic language needed to engage in many classroom activities. Cummins (1980) cites evidence from a study of 1,210 immigrant children in Canada who required much longer (approximately 5 to 7 years) to master the disembedded cognitive language required for the regular English curriculum than to master oral communicative skills.

Educators need to be cautious in exiting children from programs where they have the support of their home language. If children who are not ready for the all-English classroom are mainstreamed, their academic success may be hindered. Teachers should realize that mainstreaming children on the basis of oral language assessment is inappropriate.

All teachers need to be aware that children who are learning in a second language may have language problems in reading and writing that are not apparent if their oral abilities are used to gauge their English proficiency. These problems in academic reading and writing at the middle and high school levels may stem from limitations in vocabulary and syntactic knowledge. Even children who are skilled orally can have such gaps.

Myth 5: All children learn an L2 in the same way.

Most teachers would probably not admit that they think all children learn an L2 in the same way or at the same rate. Yet, this assumption seems to underlie a great deal of practice. Cultural anthropologists have shown that mainstream U.S. families and families from minority cultural backgrounds have different ways of talking (Heath, 1983). Mainstream children are accustomed to a deductive, analytic style of talking, whereas many culturally diverse children are accustomed to an inductive style. U.S. schools emphasize language functions and styles that predominate in mainstream families. Language is used to communicate meaning, convey information, control social behavior, and solve problems, and children are rewarded for clear and logical thinking. Children who use language in a different manner often experience frustration.

Social class also influences learning styles. In urban, literate, and technologically advanced societies, middle-class parents teach their children through language. Traditionally, most teaching in less technologically advanced, non-urbanized cultures is carried out nonverbally, through observation, supervised participation, and self-initiated repetition (Rogoff, 1990). There is none of the information testing through questions that characterizes the teaching-learning process in urban and suburban middle-class homes.

In addition, some children are more accustomed to learning from peers than from adults. Cared for and taught by older siblings or cousins, they learn to be quiet in the presence of adults and have little interaction with them. In school, they are likely to pay more attention to what their peers are doing than to what the teacher is saying.

Individual children also react to school and learn differently within groups. Some children are outgoing and sociable and learn the second language quickly. They do not worry about mistakes, but use limited resources to generate input from native speakers. Other children are shy and quiet. They learn by listening and watching. They say little, for fear of making a mistake. Nonetheless, research shows that both types of learners can be successful second language learners.

In a school environment, behaviors such as paying attention and persisting at tasks are valued. Because of cultural differences, some children may find the interpersonal setting of the school culture difficult. If the teacher is unaware of such cultural differences, their expectations and interactions with these children may be influenced.

Effective instruction for children from culturally diverse backgrounds requires varied instructional activities that consider the children's diversity of experience. Many important educational innovations in current practice have resulted from teachers adapting instruction for children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to recognize that experiences in the home and home culture affect children's values, patterns of language use, and interpersonal style. Children are likely to be more responsive to a teacher who affirms the values of the home culture.

Conclusion

Research on second language learning has shown that many misconceptions exist about how children learn languages. Teachers need to be aware of these misconceptions and realize that quick and easy solutions are not appropriate for complex problems. Second language learning by school-aged children takes longer, is harder, and involves more effort than many teachers realize.

We should focus on the opportunity that cultural and linguistic diversity provides. Diverse children enrich our schools and our understanding of education in general. In fact, although the research of the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning has been directed at children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, much of it applies equally well to mainstream students.

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